

New look at growth

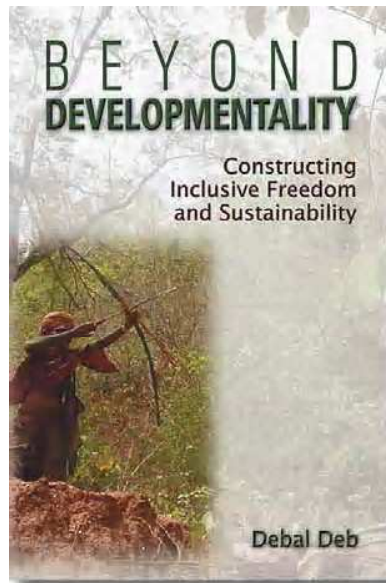
The author challenges set notions of development and stimulates new ideas on how humanity can achieve sustainable living. BY ASHISH KOTHARI

THIS book could not have been better timed, coming as it does in the midst of the worst economic crisis the world has faced for decades.

Debal Deb, a researcher at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Kolkata, has written an incisive analysis of what is fundamentally wrong with the global economic system. He also presents a framework for an alternative path of human welfare that does not imperil the very earth that sustains us, and is available to all people. He combines various disciplines and perspectives in an impressive synthesis.

Deb's basic contention is that the ideology of development, narrowly defined in terms of material wealth to be achieved through industrial growth, has become an unquestioned fetish. It is what Deb calls "developmentality", a mindset "which equates affluence with development, measures development in terms of GNP [gross national product] growth, and accepts development to be the destiny of civilisation".

The first half of the book is dedicated to an illuminating analysis of the origins, evolution and impacts of developmentality. This includes various dubious biological and sociological justifications for subjugating indigenous peoples and poor countries, leading to the colonisation of the globe by a few European nations. As capitalism spread rapidly into the colonies, subsistence societies were overtaken by the monetised economy, common resource management by private landholdings, and diverse local knowledge systems by the Western "rationalist"



IN REVIEW

Beyond Developmentality by Debal Deb; Daanish Books and Earthscan, 2009.

one. All this (and more) culminated in the ideology of developmentality, with human progress being defined narrowly in terms of indicators such as GNP or per capita income (PCI), promoted vigorously by agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The past few decades of development have witnessed environmental destruction never before seen in human history, with the collapse of many ecosystems, a global extinction crisis, and climate change threatening to engulf all of us. Simultaneously, several

hundred million people have remained in abject poverty and deprivation (nearly 40 per cent of South Asians are below the poverty line; one in three Asians do not have access to safe drinking water and one in two to sanitation). Inequalities have grown to obscene levels, exposing the hollowness of the "trickle-down" theory.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) estimates that between 1990 and 2001 "for every \$100 worth of growth in the world's per person income, just \$0.60 found its target and contributed to reducing poverty below the \$1-a-day line". Communities or countries that have resisted or hesitated to adopt the "development" ideology have been cajoled, bribed, or threatened into conforming. Foreign aid and trade have been used to increase the stronghold and profits of multinational companies, mostly under the clever guise of helping poor nations in their quest to "develop".

So successful has been the brainwashing that decision-makers in virtually all countries now aspire to the same economic goals (GNP, etc., measured in percentage growth rates), hardly stopping to assess whether this actually improves the welfare, happiness and satisfaction of all people. This is true not only of capitalist economies but also of socialist and communist countries where industrialisation has wrought havoc on the environment and people.

The author debunks, in detail, the myths of classical (so-called "neoliberal") economic theory that provide the intellectual justification for develop-



IN BHUBANESWAR. PRO-MARKET policies and unbridled consumerism allow the rich to plunder the earth, says the author.

mentality. These include the notion that every “rational” individual acts only out of self-interest, the blind faith in technology being the answer to all problems, and the dogma that nature and natural resources are only to be valued for their utility or monetary worth.

Deb also takes on the popular notions of population growth and poverty being at the root of the ecological and social crises, showing that it is government policies of free market and industrialisation, unbridled consumerism and power inequalities that allow the rich to continue plundering the earth. For instance, an average citizen of the United States “consumes 50 times more steel, 56 times more energy, 170 times more synthetic rubber and newsprint, 250 times more motor fuel, and 300 times more plastic than the average Indian citizen”.

Though the book provides examples from various countries, Deb provides more detailed case studies from India. There is a sharp critique of the Green Revolution from the 1960s to the present, which has been uncritically credited with the significant rise in foodgrain production in India and has on the other hand led to problems with declining soil productivity, water pollution and shortages, loss of biodiversity, and displacement of small farmers.

In the second half of the book, Deb turns to the search for alternatives. He critiques a number of solutions offered by proponents of what he calls “weak sustainability”, such as environmental economists who attempt to build in ecological costs, for instance, of pollution, into economic planning and budgeting. He contends that even proponents of sustainable development, such as the famous Brundtland Report *Our Common Future*, have only a limited vision, for they do not see the impossibility of ever-increasing economic growth.

For more fundamental alternatives (“strong sustainability”), Deb draws on some of Marx’s writings on the rift between people and nature, on a number of other writers and activists who have questioned the domination of the Western world view, and on the continuing traditions and ethics of indigenous peoples or “ecosystem communities” such as the Bishnois or the women of the Chipko movement. In more recent times, there have been new insights provided by “sustainability science” and ecological studies, the revolutionary zero-growth models of ecological economics, and a greater understanding of the contemporary relevance of traditional knowledge systems and common resource management regimes. Underlying all this is also a call for a new politics, with more participatory forms of democracy that do not accept either centralised state systems or the dictates of the “free market”.

It is this heady combination that Deb terms “inclusive freedom and sustainability”, the subtitle of his book. Leading the movement towards such alternatives is a range of civil society organisations, mass movements and radical individuals in various fields. But there are also formidable challenges: the powerful “bureaucrat-politician-academic” clique that defines and imposes conventional development ideology, the close links of private corporates with scientific bodies and even many non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the failure of the traditional Left to fathom and respond

to the ecological crisis, a media that continues to brainwash the public with visions of consumerist and industrial utopias, and an educational system that promotes conformity. Nevertheless, says Deb, it is possible to move towards a saner future through ecological literacy and ethics, civic democracy, inclusive freedom, and the revival of the commons.

One of the book’s strongest points is its wide-ranging use of literature and thoughts from economics, ecology, sociology, political science, philosophy and indigenous knowledge systems. It is, therefore, surprising that he does not use Gandhian thought at all. Gandhi’s challenge to development is as powerful as anyone else’s. Moreover, his vision of an alternative world and his undoubted contribution to many of the people’s movements that Deb justifiably posits as important forces towards a saner world, are impossible to ignore. Yet Gandhi figures only in passing in the context of Nehru’s post-Independence push to industrialisation.

Deb also, surprisingly, omits reference to recent global attempts at understanding humanity’s impact, including the seminal Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (www.millenniumassessment.org) and the exciting Ecological Footprint network (www.footprintnetwork.org). Another relatively minor criticism is that the book would have been much more readable if it was shorter and the language simpler. There is considerable repetitiveness, for example, of the concepts and criticisms of developmentalism. The language used is often difficult and jargonish (One example: “Environmentalism rejects the primacy of Eurocentric cultural positivism, but opposes the post-modernist escapism into non-committal pluralism.”). I do hope Deb will write a simpler, shorter version, for his work challenges set notions and stimulates new ideas on how humanity can achieve sustainable living, and therefore deserves a much wider audience. □

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